

A Note on Shell Island-1 (GcBi-11) and Some Thoughts on the Labrador Ramah Chert Trade

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In July 2018, while conducting surveys in Hamilton Inlet in collaboration with the Nunatsiavut Archaeology Office, we revisited a site tested briefly in 1969 on Shell Island, one of the westerly islands in the Smokey archipelago in northeastern Groswater Bay (Brake and Fitzhugh 2019). Shell Island is the largest of a low string of skerries east of Rattler’s Bight and Winter Cove and lies at the intersection of Pottles Bay and Alliuk Bight. The latter is a narrow, north-south passage between Holton Island and the mainland. The bight is blocked from the open sea at its north end by a low bar a few hundred meters wide. A thousand years ago, this isthmus would have been submerged, creating a water passage bypassing the shoals and surf east of Holton Island. Shell Island lies at the south end of Alliuk and offered a quiet camp shelter with fresh water, ducks, and seals. Travelers heading south from Shell Island passed East Pompey Island and entered open sea conditions for 17 km until reaching George Island, and from there it is 10 km farther to harbors at the southeastern entrance of Groswater Bay.

Groswater Bay is the largest open body of water travelers had to cross on the entire Labrador coast without access to shelter on one side or the other. Small open boats could make this crossing only with ideal weather and sea conditions, especially if carrying a heavy cargo of Ramah chert. Sometimes,

even in summer, one must wait several days for safe conditions. George Island, being high and large, is not a traveler’s haven. Except for a surf-plagued cove on its eastern side, the rest of the island has no protected landing sites. When we passed George Island in calm weather in 2018, we landed and made a brief survey of the eastern cove, finding a few boulder caches and scattered bones of recently killed caribou, but no tent-rings or other archaeological evidence. During the winter months, Groswater Bay can be crossed on foot or by sledge if the bay ice is solid, but storms frequently break the seaward ice edge, requir-

Figure 1: Shell Island (GcBi-11) and surroundings.





Figure 2: Shell Island site, view north in 2018.

ing a detour on more stable inner bay ice to the west. In spite of its prominence in the late-19th and early 20th century Newfoundland cod fishery (Browne 1909) and its seasonal abundance of marine resources (including capelin, cod and curlews), the Smokey/Indian Harbor region has never received even a preliminary archaeological investigation.

Shell Island-1 (GcBi-11) is in a small north-facing cove on the largest of the Shell Islands. The beaches and soil on this and the other islands consist mostly of deposits of blue mussel (*Mytilus edulis*), soft clam (*Mya arenaria*), and other species, covered by 10-50 cm of peat, topped by tundra vegetation of low grass, dwarf birch, lichens, and ground berries. GcBi-11 is at the lower (northern) end of a broad raised beach between low rock ridges to the east and west. We found the site when we noticed Ramah chert flakes in blowouts in the southern, upper part of the beach slope.

The 1969 excavation was a single 2x2 meter test-pit where a tent ring poked through the vegetation 4m above sea level in the northern part of the raised beach, a few meters north of a large round boulder. The turf and upper peat contained a few fragments of 19-20th century creamware and square nails. Below 40-50 cm of sterile peat, resting on a pavement of beach cobbles in a sand-shell matrix, our field notes record “a prodigious amount of chipped and frost-fractured [Ramah chert] flaking debris” (Fitzhugh 1972:102), a few biface tips and midsections, a ground slate fragment, and a few flakes of brown chert. The latter suggested the presence of a Groswater component, while the low site elevation and absence of stem fragments suggested Ancestral

Innu (Daniel Rattle complex and Point Revenge complex, 400-2000 BP) rather than Maritime Archaic. The absence of finished tools and the massive amounts of thinning flakes—almost 5 kgs—packed solid in a 15-20 cm level, indicated intense production of biface blanks. We concluded that the site should be assigned to the Ancestral Innu on the basis of its 4m a.s.l. elevation (Fitzhugh 1972:102).

When we returned to Shell Island in mid-July 2018, we opened a small area along the edge of the 1969 excavation (Locus 1), hoping to find diagnostic artifacts but recovered only a ground slate celt fragment and a large Ramah chert flake scraper. Locus 2, six meters east of L1 produced a fragment of tan chert resembling European ballast flint and European ceramics in the turf and upper peat. Residual winter frost kept us from reaching the deeper Ramah chert debitage level.



Figure 3: Worked slate and a Ramah chert flake from the 2018 dig.

Time and tide prevented us from extending our stay at Shell Island or expanding our knowledge of this intriguing site much beyond our initial interpretation. Since 1969, a considerable amount of research has expanded our knowledge and appreciation of the proto- and pre-historic Innu groups, the direct ancestors of the Innu whose land-use and tenure along the central Labrador coast and adjacent interior stretches back uninterrupted from the present day several thousand years (Fitzhugh 1978, Loring 1985, 1988, 1989, 1992; Stopp 2017). A prominent reoccurring observation throughout this literature is recognition of the pronounced preference for Ramah chert as the nearly exclusive lithic raw material used for making chipped stone tools. Even acknowledging the inherent biases of archaeologists for centering the role of lithics in their interpretations of past social and economic systems, there can be little doubt about the profound spiritual connections between Ancestral Innu groups and the translucent chert from Ramah Bay (Jenkinson 2019; Loring 1992:333, 2002:184, 2017; Stopp 2017)

Ramah Chert Studies

Although antiquarians and early archaeologists working in the Northeast had long suspected Labrador as the source for the unusual lithic raw material now known as Ramah chert (Loring 2002:167-169) in 1969 the exact location of the Ramah chert quarries in

northern Labrador had not been determined. Although Elmer Harp (1964:255-256), based on information from British-Newfoundland Exploration Company surveys, identified Ramah Bay as the likely source. Smithsonian surveys at other suspected quarry locations where William Duncan Strong had found ‘translucent quartzite’ at Northwest Corners and in Jack Lane Bay between Hopedale and Davis Inlet (Strong 1930), showed that these locations referred to quartz outcrops rather than Ramah (Fitzhugh 1974). Investigations at Ramah Bay in 1976 by Michael Gramly and Anne Abraham for the Smithsonian located the principal quarries on the north side of Ramah Bay and produced the first detailed information (Gramly 1978). Gramly’s work was followed by more detailed description and analysis by Colleen Lazenby during the Smithsonian-Bryn Mawr Torngat Project of 1977-78 (Lazenby 1980, 1984), which also identified the west side of Little Ramah Bay as another major quarry source, and subsequently by de Boutray (1981) and Burke and Gauthier (2017). Since then, Stephen Loring has written extensively on Ramah chert, it’s cultural and spiritual role in Labrador culture history, and its far-flung distribution in Eastern Canada and the U.S. Northeast and Mid-Atlantic coast region (Loring 2002, 2017). A growing appreciation of the unique role Ramah chert has played in Northeastern North American culture his-



Figure 4: A tabular block of Ramah chert, almost certainly from a Tshiash Innu (Archaic Period) component at the caribou crossing place adjacent the outlet of Kamestastin near the height-of-land between the George River drainage and the Labrador Coast. Recovered approximately 400-500 kms (depending on the route) from the Ramah chert quarries, representing a considerable expenditure of time and energy.

tory has led to a flurry of recent investigations (much of which is summarized in Curtis and Desrosiers 2017) and prompted the Canadian government to designate “Kitjigattalik—the Ramah Chert Quarries” as a National Historic Site in 2014.

In Labrador, Ramah chert is the dominant lithic material for chipped stone inventories in Late Maritime Archaic (4000-3600 BP), Middle Dorset Pre-Inuit (1800-1300 BP), and Ancestral Innu (400-2000 BP) sites, and its peak distribution in southern sites beyond the Quebec-Labrador Peninsula coincides with these periods. In most instances, specifically at sites in Maine associated with the Moorehead Burial tradition (ca. 3700-4500 B.P.), and at Early Woodland ceremonial sites throughout the Northeast (ca. 2000-3000 BP), Ramah chert appears as finished bifaces apparently manufactured in the north and brought south as finished products, clearly objects of deep spiritual significance. It is only after about 1500 years ago that Ramah chert, as a raw material, makes its way to New England (Cox 2021) and the Chesapeake (Lowrey 2017), and doubtless in-between, where it is worked and shaped into local forms. During this late prehistoric period, and prior to the disruptions brought about by expanding Inuit populations and

eventually European economic interests, the Algonkian peoples of the Far Northeast were clearly linked by webs of social, spiritual and linguistic ties. Those ties most manifest appearance—at least from an archaeological perspective—in the acquisition, distribution and use of exotic lithic raw materials. In central and southern Labrador (Loring 1992, Stopp 2008) and the Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland (Hull 2002) significant amounts of Ramah chert were moving south in a tangible expression of social engagement.

In addition to individual implements, caches of extraordinary large Ramah chert finished bifaces have been found at Port au Choix in western Newfoundland, at the Spingle site in L’Anse au Clair, near Port Hope Simpson at Alexis Bay in southern Labrador, and at the Stubbert site in Kegashka on the Quebec Lower North Shore (Loring 2017:203-4).

While Ancestral Innu sites all show a conspicuous fidelity to Ramah chert, so far, Shell Island-1 is the only site on the Labrador coast that can be construed as a specialized lithic workshop. Some Daniel Rattle components (like Kamarsuk [HbCj-1] and Daniel Rattle Area IV [GlCg-1]) were literally “paved” with Ramah chert debitage, but never so much as to form a distinct stratigraphic layer as at Shell Island-1. Although limited to a single two-meter square excavation unit, we know of no other sites in Labrador south of Ramah Bay that evidence such a dense deposit of flaking debris accompanied by a relative absence of finished, use-broken, or worn-out bifaces, scrapers, and utilized flakes. Excavations conducted at nearby ancestral Innu sites like Aly’s Head (GcBk-11), Big Island-1 (GbBm-1) and Winter Cove-4 (GcBi-4) all evidence the domestic use of Ramah chert with a range of artifacts all of which are apparently missing at Shell Island-1.

The site at Shell Island bares striking similarities to the North Cove site –EgBf-08—on Newfoundland’s Northern Peninsula (Hull 2002) where a similar Ramah chert workshop was uncovered. At North Cove Area A over 2kg of Ramah chert debitage (over 10,000 flakes, including a significant quantity of flakes with bifacial striking platforms) formed a pavement several cms thick over an area of several square meters.

Sites like Shell Island and North Cove invite speculation about the nature of resource procurement

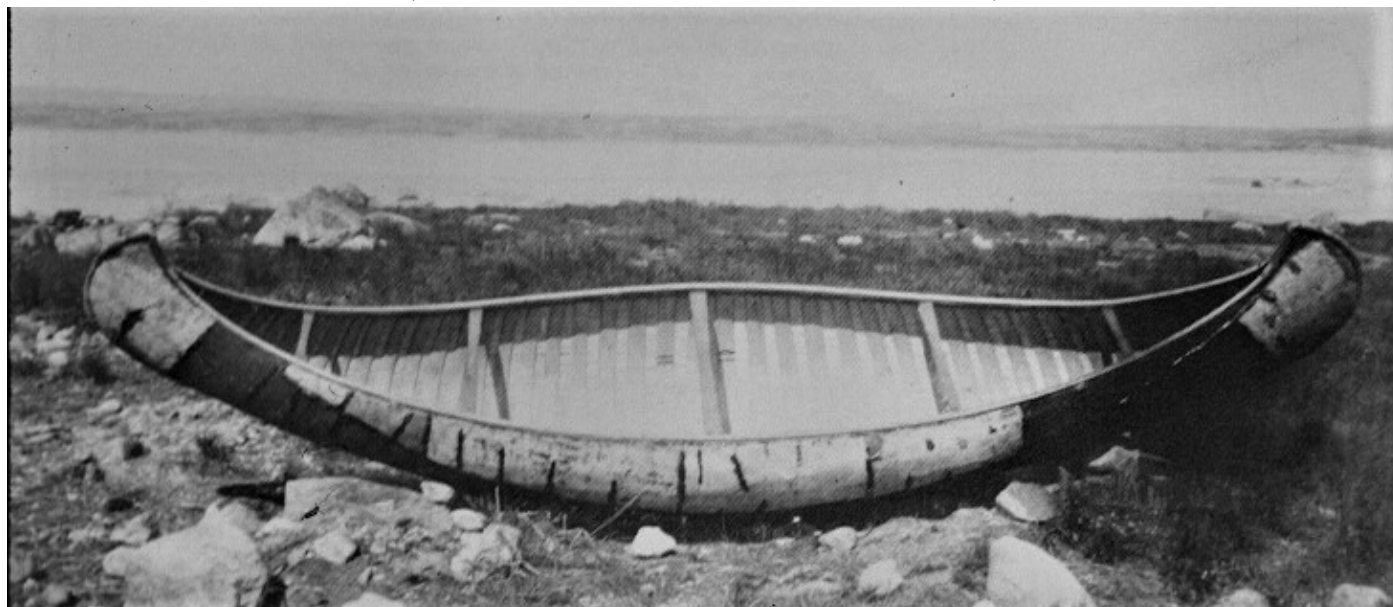
strategies and perhaps even the emergence of socially distinct specialists in the form of “boat captains”/ navigators. Those individuals with the chutzpah, charisma, and social allegiances (Bogojavlensky 1969) to attempt such daring travel as well as craft specialists, skilled crafts-persons capable of producing the large extravagant Ramah chert bifaces (Cross 1990).

Sites like Shell Island also offer intriguing insight to the scheduling practices and resource procurement strategies of maritime hunting peoples where it has been proposed that social relations predicated –in part—on the long-distance acquisition and exchange of exotic lithic raw materials create a cohesive web of social entanglements that could mitigate local subsistence exigencies. It remains for future researchers to elaborate on these themes and to determine the dynamics of acquisition both from a socio-cultural perspective as Algonkian-language speakers encountered Dorset (diagnostic Point Revenge projectile points have been recovered from a Late Dorset winter-house at Saglek (Loring 1992:399-401, Thomson 1981) as well as from a logistical one addressing the season and technologies involved. With the lengthening of days, early spring acquisition of Ramah and transportation over the still frozen shore-fast ice might have been a preferable strategy to the risks of open water travel. That said the Innu who frequented the east coast of Hudson’s Bay and Ungava had perfected an extraordinarily wide-beamed,

high-sided “crooked” canoe that was capable of carrying huge loads and weathering rough water. One has to wonder why, having transported the Ramah chert raw material across Saglek Fiord, down along the mountainous coastline adjacent the Kaumajet Mountains, around the Kiglapaits and across Voisey Bay, that it isn’t until Shell Island (and North Cove) that significant biface production ---with its concomitant discard of the precious raw material, takes place.

The conspicuous consumption of Ramah chert at early Ancestral Innu sites like Daniel Rattle 1 (GlCg-1) where almost 8kgs of Ramah chert debitage was recovered, and Kamarsuk (HbCj-1) with over 3 kgs, and presumably Shell Island-1, offer a striking contrast to later proto-historic Innu sites like Aly’s Head (GcBk-11), Big Island-1 (GbBm-1). Large pieces of debitage are nearly entirely absent from these sites, giving the impression that Ramah chert had become more expensive and more difficult to access, perhaps reflecting the dissolution of previous social arrangements and extractive practices with the arrival of the Inuit in northern Labrador.

Figure 5: The Innu of Ungava had perfected a unique ocean-going birch-bark canoe that would have been capable of transporting unusually heavy loads. Photographed by Lucien Turner at Fort Chimo, Ungava Bay in 1883. (Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 7192)



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